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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Andropov as Henry II

Italian Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio, a Socialist, has likened Bulgarian complicity in the shooting of Pope John Paul II to an act of war. Those are strong words, and while nobody thinks it likely or even very desirable that Italy or the rest of the West should embark on an armed assault against Bulgaria and the East bloc, Mr. Lagorio has uttered an important truth. For even though the West might not consider itself engaged in what is conventionally defined as a war, such desperate acts as ordering a hit on the religious leader of a large segment of the human race would seem to indicate that Bulgaria and its masters consider themselves in a war.

Many in the West will try their hardest to blink that fact. As author Claire Sterling points out in the article on today's op-ed page, the rush is on to draw the veil over Bulgarian and Soviet complicity in the attempted assassination of the pope. It's all a fragment of the excitable Italian imagination. It's a vendetta by the anti-Andropov faction. It's actually a CIA plot, some otherwise serious people would suggest.

And even those who admit there may be some fire where there is so much smoke seem to be mainly concerned with explaining away the abominable deed. After all, didn't an American administration seek to rub out Castro? And maybe we shouldn't leap to conclusions about the Russians, even if the Bulgarians were doing what they imagined to be Moscow's bidding. Our colleagues at the New York Times reached into their historical tote bag the other day to liken Yuri Andropov to Henry II, the 12th century English king whose knights slew Archbishop Thomas Beckett after Henry asked, "Who will free me from this turbulent priest?"

Well, pardon us, but we have a hard time imagining Yuri Andropov crawling on his knees to the nearest cathedral to ask forgiveness, as Henry II was reputed to have done when an outraged population learned of his complicity in the murder. We also doubt the Soviet or Bulgarian puppet parliaments will treat us to endless public inquiries into the subject, as the U.S. Congress did into assassination plots that allegedly were countenanced by the White House, or that Pravda will turn up a Deep Throat of its own to enlighten us. One can play endless intellectual games about how the Communist system is really no different from our own, but in the end they are just that—games.

Precisely because Bulgaria and the Soviet Union are closed societies, we may never know the exact nature of the plot to kill the pope. But as Mrs. Sterling, who was the first to publicly lay out the "Bulgarian connection," says nearby, the Italian judicial system—not its politicians or its secret service or its press—has built a persuasive case that the Bulgarians have been working overtime at undermining the West through drug and arms trafficking, support for terrorism and even murder. And since Bulgaria so clearly acts as a puppet of Moscow, it seems fair to suspect that the plot was hatched at the highest levels of the Kremlin—by the self-same Yuri Andropov, that lovable, "liberal" head of the KGB.

Final judgment must await the actual findings of the Italian courts. But we suspect what is going on here is the same temptation to deny reality that we have seen on other occasions, notably in the effort to avoid facing up to the fact of "yellow rain." The im-

plications of Soviet use of biological and chemical warfare, or a Communist plot to gun down a pope are simply too grave for many people to face. They suggest that the system we face really is different, really is not like ours, and is capable of real evil.

This challenges a lot of what has become conventional wisdom in the West, that if only we are nice to the other guys they will eventually respond in kind. If those assumptions are shattered, what hope is there for detente or arms control or other cherished hopes of a peaceable people?

So rather than face up to these grim realities, ways are found to avoid confronting them. Excuses are invented for our adversaries. We look for scapegoats among ourselves. We whistle past the graveyard.

It's a fair question: Well, what do we do about it? When Italy gets right down to it, we doubt it will do much. And in truth there's not much Italy can do beyond the symbolic. But the West should not hesitate to draw the logical conclusions about the kind of system we are dealing with, and avoid policies which leave us vulnerable to an adversary that clearly has no scruples. What this case shows, as has Soviet violation of major arms control treaties in the use of yellow rain, is that the burden of proof should be on those who think good faith is enough in dealing with the Kremlin, particularly under its present leadership.